

TAIZÉ: A PARABLE OF COMMUNITY

by

Ingrid Nora Forsyth

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Approved by:

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Laura Ammon, Ph.D., Thesis Director

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Kathleen Adams, Ph.D., Second Reader

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Kevin Schilbrack, Ph.D., Dept. of Philosophy and Religion Honors Director

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Leslie Sargent Jones, Ph.D., Director, The Honors College

## Abstract:

This paper is about a Christian, ecumenical community situated in the small village of Taizé. It is a monastic community, with over one hundred monks from diverse parts of the world who live there permanently. It has also become a place of pilgrimage for people all over the world over the past fifty years. People come for various lengths of time to share in a simple life of contemplative prayer and meditation. During my time in Taizé I was able to see how simplicity of mind and spirit leads to cohesion in a community and lays the path toward reconciliation of humanity. The simple prayers steeped in the ancient monastic traditions of chant and silent contemplation profoundly affect thousands of pilgrims who travel to Taizé each year. The first chapter gives history and background on the community and includes information of the life of the founder, a Protestant named Roger Schutz. The second chapter is a personal reflection about my experience in Taizé during the summer of 2015. I spent seven weeks in Taizé and learned many things that will allow me to see the rest of my life through a different lens. The third chapter is a short conclusion that explains how I hope to apply the lessons learned in Taizé, creating a community of my own in my home, the Appalachian mountains of North Carolina.

## **Chapter 1: History and Background on the Taizé Community**

“Since my youth, I think that I have never lost the intuition that community life could be a sign that God is love, and love alone. Gradually the conviction took shape in me that it was essential to create a community with men determined to give their whole life and who would always try to understand one another and be reconciled, a community where kindness of heart and simplicity would be at the centre of everything.”<sup>1</sup>

I first heard about Taizé when I was in Barcelona living with a large Catholic family. In order to have the full cultural experience, I went to mass with them, prayed with them, and tried to understand their perspective on religion. However, I was surprised to hear several of the same hymns (sung in Catalán) at their mass that I had heard growing up in a small Episcopal church in the small North Carolina mountain community of Valle Crucis. Although played in a different style with different instruments (they always used guitars while I grew up hearing organ), and a different language, the melodies and harmonies were undoubtedly the same. Sitting next to my Spanish host mother Dolores in the beautiful St. Cugat Monastery I was immediately taken back to my religious experiences as a child. I learned later that the hymns were "Taizé hymns."

It was a while before I really understood what Taizé was and how the hymns were related to the small monastic community situated in Eastern France. The St. Cugat Monastery located just outside of Barcelona held a monthly Taizé service for the congregation on Saturday nights. Full of curiosity, I went along with Dolores to hear the service. The set-up was very simple: clusters of votive candles on the floor and a few orange drapes hung in the sanctuary. Everybody

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<sup>1</sup>Schutz, Roger. *God Is Love Alone*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003.

sat on the floor in front of the image of the Virgin Mary and sang together. I'm not sure if it was the resonance of our voices in the large monastery, the ethereal candle-light, the musky smell, or the combination of all of those things, but my experience was magical.

The form and all the components of a Taizé service are very simple. It can be done with any amount of people in many different settings. The service has two main components: song and silence. The songs are very short and repetitive, rarely longer than eight measures, and are sung many times over, without any limit on the duration of the hymn. It is a kind of mixture between a mantra and a chant, as the same text is always repeated. The Taizé website provides a brief description of why repetitive song is important:

Singing is one of the most essential elements of worship. Short songs, repeated again and again, give it a meditative character.

Using just a few words they express a basic reality of faith, quickly grasped by the mind. As the words are sung over many times, this reality gradually penetrates the whole being. Meditative singing thus becomes a way of listening to God. It allows everyone to take part in a time of prayer together and to remain together in attentive waiting on God, without having to fix the length of time too exactly.<sup>2</sup>

During the meditative singing, I completely lost track of time and the words I was singing began to be imprinted into my mind and soul. When I left, I heard the melodies and words ringing in

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<sup>2</sup>"Meditative Singing." July 1, 2004. Accessed July 29, 2015. [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article338.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article338.html).

my mind for days afterward. I thought that this was the first time I had left a religious service without troubling existential questions, but an overwhelming peace.

In his book, Taizé: A Meaning to Life, Olivier Clement explains the hymns: "Something very interesting at Taizé is that this formula of calming repetition has been taken up in the liturgy; that is, it is not used only in personal prayer, but also in prayer together or common prayer. Some young people, who know almost nothing of mystery, are introduced to it here, and they begin to learn how to pray."<sup>3</sup>

In between the hymns there is a scripture reading, a short spoken prayer, and a psalm is sung. However, the climax is the prolonged period of silence that happens in the middle of the service. I had never experienced a ten-minute silence with a group of people before. At first it was uncomfortable and it felt strange not to know how long the silence was going to last. I was preoccupied with time, but before too long the silence began to envelop me. I still had the hymns running through my head and the pregnant silence allowed the themes to sink in and integrate deeper into my mind.

To describe the value of silence the founder of Taizé, Brother Roger, quotes a verse from Psalm 65: "Silence is praise to you, O God." He writes: "When words and thoughts come to an end, God is praised in silent wonder and admiration."<sup>4</sup> Because we cannot really understand the nature of God or his creation, it is useless to spend a majority of the worship talking about what we believe. When we spend too long on sermons the mystical nature of God begins to vanish and humans start to take over the role of God. I realized that silence is really the thing that allows humans to experience God in the fullest. The "mystery" that Olivier Clement writes about

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<sup>3</sup>Clement, Olivier. *A Meaning to Life*. GIA Publishers, 1997.

<sup>4</sup>"The Value of Silence." October 24, 2001. [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article12.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article12.html).

becomes ever-present during the silence. It is an introduction to a new perspective on God. It introduces a way of looking at one's spirituality without judgment, and allows one to see life as a vast landscape, with numerous possibilities.

Roger Schutz, the founder of Taizé, harbored different ideas on worship from a very young age. Roger felt a profound need for reconciliation in the Christian church, and spent his life looking for ways to meet that goal. Born in 1915, he grew up in Switzerland, the youngest of nine children. He grew up in a Protestant family, the son of a pastor who moved around a lot to different church communities. He only had one brother who was much older, so it was really his seven sisters who influenced him as a child. He was "a solitary boy in an essentially female environment."<sup>5</sup> Although his parents had little time to devote to him, Roger describes his childhood as extremely happy. From a young age, he learned to love the small and simple things in life, taking joy in the life and nature that surrounded him. "There were the birthdays when he would rush down to find that a peony in the garden had opened in salute. The fact that he had prepared it on the previous day was no impediment to his delight."<sup>6</sup> He was also surrounded by music which brought him an immense joy. He developed a love for classical music, weeping while he listened to the few records he could get his hands on.

The influence of Roger's maternal grandmother was perhaps the most important and formative during his childhood. She had lived in France during the WWI, right in the middle of a war zone. She saw a lot of suffering and there were a couple of instances where bombs landed inside her house. It was a miracle that she survived the war living in the North of France. While most of Europe was becoming more atheist after the horrors of the Great War, it had the opposite

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<sup>5</sup>Spink, Kathryn. *The Life and Vision of Brother Roger of Taizé*. GIA Publishers, 2005. pg 5.

<sup>6</sup>Spink 6.

effect on Roger's grandmother. Raised Protestant, she began attending Mass regularly and strongly desired to receive Communion in the Catholic Church. She believed that it was the time to attend church and to participate in Communion more than ever. She recognized that divided Christians were killing one another and that reconciliation was the answer, not the abandonment of faith. "She did not seek to justify her action or talk about it, but I understood that by going to the Catholic Church she was effecting an immediate reconciliation within herself. It was as if she knew intuitively that in the Catholic Church, the Eucharist was a source of unanimity of the faith."<sup>7</sup>

His grandmother was to have a lasting impact on young Roger, planting a seed for the desire for reconciliation. An aunt said: "When he was a child Roger used to talk readily about how he would organize his life when he was an adult. Everything was to take place in a large country house where there would always be lots of people. He had planned a kind of 'harmony' for the day and there would always be a generous and expansive welcome."<sup>8</sup> This vision was undoubtedly inspired by the warmth he felt in his home and the happiness of having a large, united family. From a young age he understood the value of life in community. To him, it was really the only thing that ever mattered. His vision ultimately came true in the founding of Taizé. Brother Roger was always to have a large family.

However, Roger's life was not always happy. During his teenage and early adult years his body was wracked with tuberculosis, and Roger was inches from death many times. Unable to participate in the activities of daily life, he spent most of his sick years in solitude. He took many walks out in the forest, pondering nature and wondering about theological and existential

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<sup>7</sup>Spink 9.

<sup>8</sup>Spink 12.

questions. Roger was never sure how much time he would have left on Earth. However, he insists that his late adolescence was a very beautiful time. "That period was beautiful - remains beautiful. They were difficult years but years during which one was very aware that one was building oneself, shaping oneself."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his life Roger always had a profound passion for listening to others. He attributes that passion to the darker periods in his life. "When the storms come, in the darkness where there is so little light, instead of turning in upon ourselves, we may come to realize that it is by this means that a heart open to all is created, engendered in us."<sup>10</sup> He calls the heart "a great ocean" which can better be understood during the painful times in life. During his illness he began to desire to understand others better as well as himself. He did not want to give advice (he saw that as grounds for making extreme errors), but to simply listen.

Roger had always wanted to be both a writer and a farmer, but that was not in accordance with his father's wishes. His father was an ordained pastor and wanted his youngest son to follow in his footsteps. He did not see farming, and especially not writing, as a lucrative career. Roger was torn between his own heart and his father's wishes, but eventually enrolled in the universities of Lausanne and Strasbourg to study theology for four years. Roger does not describe his time at the university favorably: "I was transported into an unknown world, a world of which I grasped nothing and one which I had not chosen. In fact someone there remarked to me one day that I was like a man who had come to a concert and could not understand the music. And it was so true."<sup>11</sup> Although he was an extremely spiritual person, theology did not interest him.

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<sup>9</sup>Spink 20.

<sup>10</sup>Spink 20.

<sup>11</sup>Spink 24.



There was something good, however, that came out of his time at the university. In 1939, he was asked by his fellow classmates to become the president of the Christian Student Association, a position for which Roger felt extremely ill-suited. He declined at first, believing that he had no interest or expertise in the matters that were discussed at the meetings. However, he eventually took the position and began organizing retreats for the students where they could contemplate together. Under Roger's direction, the "Grande Communauté" was created, which attracted a substantial number of students. Roger often meditated on the idea of a community in his adolescence and young adulthood, becoming more and more sure that he needed to make his dream a reality. He describes it as: "a kind of instinct...a certainty that something was going to happen."<sup>12</sup> For Roger the most attractive part of living in community was having "someone else praying because one prays very little, very badly oneself."<sup>13</sup> A community is absolutely necessary to live a fulfilling and Christian life.

Roger knew that he had to begin this community alone. He decided to leave his home country, Switzerland, in August of 1940 right after WWII had begun. He bought a small house in a village called Taizé, which was located among beautiful rolling hills in the Burgundy region of France. Kathryn Spink describes Roger's sentiment as he took the first step toward building the Taizé community:

At a time when Europe was torn asunder and some Christians prayed apparently oblivious to the suffering of others, Roger had asked himself incessantly why such opposition and conflict should exist between men and why between Christians in particular. He

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<sup>12</sup>Spink 27.

<sup>13</sup>Spink 28.

had asked himself too whether a way existed on this earth for one man to totally understand another and - on a day he still remembers well, in a place he could still describe - as the shadows fell on evening he resolved that if such a way existed, a way that meant seeking to understand everything about another rather than to be understood, he must commit himself to it and pursue it until death.<sup>14</sup>

The seeking to understand rather than to be understood has always been a core tenet of the life in Taizé. In the midst of the Second World War, Roger remembered his grandmother's reaction to the First World War. He shared her belief that only way to respond to human depravity and suffering was to counteract it with as much faith, trust, and beauty as possible. Roger wanted to provide a place that would welcome anyone, he wanted to live simply and withhold definition about those he encountered. His life calling was to listen, not to judge.

Brother Roger originally used his home to house Jewish refugees. The house was located just a few miles from the demarcation line that cut France in two parts and many Jews came fleeing across the border looking for a place to stay. During this time, he continued to pray on his own, not forcing his beliefs on anyone, and always opening his doors to anyone who needed a room for the night. Little by little, more people joined Roger's simple lifestyle. There were many anti-German sentiments in the village after the war, and several prisoner of war camps situated close to the Taizé village. One of the village women who had lost a son in the war killed a German POW in 1945. However, Brother Roger did not see the issue as black and white and

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<sup>14</sup>Spink 29.

opened the doors of his home to the endangered and shelterless German soldiers. While some were enraged by Brother Roger's actions, others saw it as a step toward reconciliation of Europe.

By 1949, there were seven brothers living together who had pledged a life of prayer and celibacy. Brother Roger said in an interview: "What I had envisioned was a small group, a few men bound for life by a commitment to God, a life of prayer, a contemplative life but who would work – and who would not look for anything else."<sup>15</sup> However, more and more people began to travel to Taizé to share in their simple life. Brother Roger welcomed any visitors with open arms, not willing to turn anyone away, even when they didn't have enough resources to feed and house the pilgrims. As Taizé grew Brother Roger became uneasy about the direction his community was taking because it wasn't what he had envisioned. However, he decided not to fight the expansion because he recognized that to turn his back on that following would be to abandon those young people in whom he has identified 'a thirst for communion.' It would be averting his eyes while they abandoned the Church. Many who came to Taizé were giving the Church a last chance. He said: "Were it not for this abandonment of the Church, perhaps our life might have been different."<sup>16</sup>

In 1952, Roger wrote a short book called The Rule of Taizé which was to lay the foundation for community life. He later expanded and modified it and changed the name to The Sources of Taizé. It explains the theology that is promoted in Taizé, the overarching theme of reconciliation among Christians, and the great simplicity of life in the village. Roger writes beautifully of reconciliation and the necessity for forgiveness in the hearts of all humans. "In any disagreement what is the use of trying to figure out who was wrong and who was right? Suppose

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<sup>15</sup>Spink 50.

<sup>16</sup>Spink 50.

people distort your intentions. If you are judged wrongly because of Christ, forgive. You will find that you are free, free beyond compare. Forgive and then forgive again. That is the highest expression of loving.”<sup>17</sup>

Roger stresses the immediate need for reconciliation, quoting Matthew 5: 23-24. “For the Gospel, reconciliation does not wait. ‘When you are bringing your gift to the altar and your sister or brother has something against you, leave everything; first go and be reconciled.’ Ecumenism fosters illusory hopes when it puts off reconciliation until later. It comes to a standstill, becomes fossilized even, when it accepts the creation of parallel paths on which the vital energies of forgiveness are squandered. Reconciliation makes us fully consistent with the Gospel...and so offers a leaven of peace and trust to the entire human family.”<sup>18</sup>

For Brother Roger, the path to reconciliation involves living in the spirit of the Gospel: simplicity, joy, and mercy. It takes a great amount of forgiveness, ability to look beyond past wounds, and desire to understand others. He goes on to lay out the essentials which makes common life possible in Taizé. One must cease to look only for his or her own gain. “By sharing, are you among those who, with very little generate a fine human hope? With almost nothing, are you a creator of reconciliation in that communion of love which is the Body of Christ, his Church? Sustained by a shared momentum, rejoice. you are no longer alone; in all things you are advancing together with others. With them, you are called to live the parable of community.”<sup>19</sup>

The ecumenical movement was met with some resistance from the Catholic Church, but Brother Roger had a close relationship with Pope John XXIII who fully supported the ever-growing community in Burgundy, France. The Pope once greeted Roger with the words: “Ah,

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<sup>17</sup>Schutz, Roger. *The Sources of Taizé*. GIA Publishers, 2000. pg 26.

<sup>18</sup>The Sources of Taizé, 27.

<sup>19</sup>The Sources of Taizé, 48-49.

Taizé, that little springtime!”<sup>20</sup> Although a Protestant by birth, Roger was invited to participate in the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. His presence at the Council represented a loud cry for ecumenism. He knew that for ecumenism to become a reality “the Catholic church would have to accept Christians in such a way that they would not have to convert to Roman Catholicism and deny their traditions and origins in order to belong to the universal church.”<sup>21</sup> He advocated for ecumenical rights, hoping to stress the Paschal Mystery as the basis for Christian belief, and not dogma from a particular tradition.

Roger continued to have close relationships with the Popes throughout the decades. In 1986, Pope John Paul II visited the community, and explained the meaning of his visit to the pilgrims there:

One passes through Taizé as one passes close to a spring of water.  
The traveler stops, quenches his thirst, and continues on his way.  
The brothers of the community, you know, do not want to keep you. They want, in prayer and silence, to enable you to drink the living water promised by Christ, to know his joy, to discern his presence, to respond to his call, then to set out again to witness to his love and to serve your brothers and sisters in your parishes, your schools, your universities, and in all your places of work.  
Today in all the Churches and Christian communities, and even among the highest political leaders in the world, the TaizéCommunity is known for the trust always full of hope that it

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<sup>20</sup>The Sources of Taizé, 83.

<sup>21</sup>Cimino, Richard. *Trusting the Spirit: Renewal and Reform in American Religion*. Jossey-Bass, 2007. pg 103.

places in the young. It is above all because I share this hope that I  
have come here this morning.<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that while the community was radical for many individuals who were steeped in a particular tradition, it was also gaining widespread support. Taizé has been visited by various Archbishops and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Taizé became a worldwide beacon for Christian unity and reconciliation.

While the community attracted only Protestants in the beginning, by the 1970s several Catholic brothers had also joined. As more people join from different corners of the world, Taizé becomes more diverse, ecumenical, and international. The visitors to Taizé were also from a variety of countries and backgrounds. In response, the liturgy became increasingly more simple, rooted in traditions of chant and contemplation.

The style of singing evolved over the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. For the first couple decades of the community's life, most of the singing was in French. The repertoire included a mixture of chants from *Chorales* and *Psalms* dating back to the sixteenth century. As an unexpectedly large number of young people started visiting Taizé in the early 1970s, it became necessary to modify the liturgy and the music. The forms of the songs and the languages used were also modified. Brother Robert explains the push toward simpler, repetitive chants in the 1970s:

With the growing number of people visiting Taizé since the start of the seventies, another pastoral problem presented itself. It was necessary to determine what forms of song should be employed so that all could actively *participate* in the prayer of the Community, given that the time for rehearsal is necessarily very limited. A

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<sup>22</sup>The Sources of Taizé 83.

solution had to be found in using simple elements so that a crowd of people could quickly learn them. These elements, though, had to be of real musical quality so that genuine prayer could be expressed through them.<sup>23</sup>

The community asked the French liturgical composer, Jacques Berthier, to write some hymns that would satisfy these needs. He wrote numerous short hymns with repetitive structures that could be memorized quickly and easily. To address the issue of language, he wrote many of the hymns in Latin. While not a universal tongue, it is a dead language and contains a foreign element for everyone. It does not belong to a particular group and gives no one an advantage. He also translated the majority of the hymns into several languages. He rewrote the text for each language, often changing the meaning slightly, so that it could be sung without compromising the musical form. Today, the hymns are exported to all the corners of the earth and each community may sing the hymns in its own language. If a translation in one's native language is not available, people often write their own translations. For example, proud of their minority language and heritage, the Barcelona community had translated many of the Taizé hymns into Catalan.

Brother Roger lived to the ripe old age of 90 in the peaceful Taizé community. However, one August evening in 2005 an unexpected and horrific event happened. Jason Brian Santos explains the incident, as he was sitting not far from Brother Roger when it happened. "I was maybe thirty feet from where Brother Roger was sitting. With bleary eyes and the Taizé songbook in hand, I fumbled my way into the first chant. Just as I was settling into the melody of this chant I heard a piercing, blood-curdling scream come from the center of the church. I

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<sup>23</sup>Berthier, Jacques. *Music From Taizé: Responses, Litanies, Acclamations, Canons*. GIA Publishers, 1978. pg vii.

whipped my head up just in time to see a brother cloaked in a white prayer robe lunge toward a woman who was next to Brother Roger.”<sup>24</sup> Although he did not know it at the moment it happened, Santos had witnessed the murder of the benevolent Taizé founder. Roger was stabbed in the neck three times, and died almost instantly.

There was a lot of confusion in the community after the incident. After a close investigation, more information was obtained from the murderer. It was ascertained that she was from Romania and was mentally insane. She had been to Taizé before, disrupting prayers by breaking out into screams on several occasions. She had been asked to leave the community three times before.<sup>25</sup> No one is sure why she returned to Taizé or what the middle-aged woman’s motives were. There was a lot of confusion surrounding Brother Roger’s death. Thousands of people were heart-broken and disillusioned by the fact that such a beautiful man could be killed in such a brutal way, especially during a time of prayer.

Many people likened Roger’s death to that of Martin Luther King Jr or Gandhi. However, there is a major difference in that Roger was not engaged in a particular political or ideological struggle at the time of his death, and he was not assassinated by opponents who disagreed with his viewpoint. Brother Francois wrote a beautiful article on the Taizé website entitled “Why Brother Roger Died.” It is aimed to elucidate the confusion that surrounded the horrific incident. He writes that “evil always resists explanation” and he believes Roger was targeted because he was so innocent.

In living alongside Brother Roger, an aspect of his personality  
always struck me, and I wonder whether it is not the reason why he

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<sup>24</sup>Santos, Jason Brian. *A Community Called Taizé: A Story of Prayer, Worship and Reconciliation*. InterVarsity Press, 2008. pg 18.

<sup>25</sup>Santos 20.



was targeted. Brother Roger was an innocent. It was not that he had no flaws. But an innocent is someone for whom things are self-evident in a way in which they are not for others. For innocent people, the truth is obvious. It does not depend on reasoning. They “see” it, in a certain sense, and it is hard for them to realize that other people have a more painstaking approach. What they say is simple and clear for them, and they are surprised that others do not react to it in the same way. It is easy to understand why such people often feel at a loss, or vulnerable. And yet, in general their innocence is not naïve. For them, reality is simply not as opaque as it is for others. They “see through it.”

In the gospels, the simplicity of Jesus is disturbing. Some of those who listened to him felt themselves being called into question. It was as if the deepest thoughts of their heart were revealed. The clear language of Jesus and his ability to read hearts represented a threat to them. A person who does not let themselves be locked into conflicts appears dangerous to some. Such a person is fascinating, but fascination can easily turn into hostility.

Brother Roger certainly fascinated people by his innocence, his instant comprehension, his look. And I think he saw, in some people’s eyes, that fascination could be transformed into mistrust or aggression. For someone who carries irresolvable conflicts within themselves, that innocence must have become intolerable.

And in that case it was not enough to insult that innocence. It had to be eliminated.’<sup>26</sup>

By likening Roger’s life to that of Christ, he gave Roger’s death a whole new meaning for the community. Roger lived in the spirit of the Beatitudes and followed the life that Christ prescribed in the Gospels. He was killed because of his great simplicity and his death did not take the meaning away from his life’s work. On the contrary, his sudden death was a call for humanity to forgive more, share more, and listen more.

Tens of thousands of people came to the funeral, where Brother Alois (Roger’s successor) said: “God of goodness, we entrust to your forgiveness Luminita Solcan who, in an act of sickness, put an end to the life of Brother Roger. With Christ on the cross we say to you: Father, forgive her, she does not know what she did.”<sup>27</sup> Solcan was admitted into an institution where the brothers have visited her once a month for the past ten years. There was an air of sadness after Roger’s death, but also of peace. The brothers buried him next to the old Romanesque village church with a simple grave: a bed of flowers and a short wooden cross at the top. During my time in Taizé, I often visited his grave, thinking about how alive the flower-bed seemed.

Brother Alois, who was named the successor in 1998 by Brother Roger, became the new prior of Taizé and continues in that role today. Not much has changed about the community over the past couple of decades. While the rest of the world booms with technological advancement, Taizé seems to stay more or less the same. People who had been to Taizé times over the years verified that they have always used the same cleaning supplies, buildings, schedule of the day,

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<sup>26</sup>“Why Brother Roger Died.” August 12, 2006. [http://taize.fr/en\\_article3790.html](http://taize.fr/en_article3790.html)

<sup>27</sup>Santos 75.

food, eating utensils, etc. It is a refuge in the midst of a rapidly changing, fast-moving world. The simplicity is what has always kept it alive. Taizé remains a place of repose, a kind of hospital for the soul, even when tragedy hits the community or the rest of the world. It is truly a testament to the peace, omnipresence, and everlasting life of God.

## **Chapter 2: Personal Experience in Taizé**

I arrived in the village of Taizé at night this past May after two long flights, a layover, two train rides, and a bus ride. Taizé is a bit hidden in the Bourgogne countryside, so it is not the easiest place to find. After arriving in the Macon train station, I hopped on the bus that goes around Bourgogne and stops at the Taizé community. I made it just in time to board the last bus of the day. The soft, rolling hills and vast wheat fields outside the train window calmed me. There is very little development in this part of France, and most of the inhabitants are farmers. The fields are beautiful in their simplicity, and reflect the spirit of Taizé very well. The rolling countryside doesn't demand anything, isn't overwhelming in any way, and invites the onlooker to simply exist. At night the moon shines brightly, clearly observable hanging high in the sky above the hills. One feels close to the sun, moon, and stars in Taizé. There is less to distract the human from his or her relationship with the great forces that govern the Earth.

I experienced a powerful sense of relief and home-coming when I stepped off the bus. Although I had only been in Taizé twice before (both times for less than a week) I feel a powerful connection to the place. After a long journey, it is a relaxing, welcoming, and restorative environment.

The sun had just set and Taizé was very quiet. Sometimes there are thousands of people in Taizé, and sometimes only a few hundred. This was a less busy week, and it seemed like everyone had already gone to bed. There were only a few people in the welcome area, who offered me some tea, assigned me to a dormitory, and gave me a brief schedule of Taizé life.

The day officially starts with morning prayer at 8:15. Afterwards, there is a breakfast (always bread and chocolate sticks). The rest of the morning is spent in a Bible Introduction

where one of the Taizé brothers talks about a specific biblical passage and the pilgrims form small groups to discuss it amongst themselves. The text is usually taken from one of the Gospels, carefully chosen to promote the message of God's unconditional love. In terms of doctrine, Taizé's Christianity is a bit watered down from many churches. It is not a naive faith that is suggested, but a simple one. It is designed to bring people together and overcome alienation, so "God is Love" is an ever-present theme. Taizé suggests a mystical faith that can be discovered only by an individual person alone. Going off the simple (but always mysterious) belief that God created the world, loves his creation, and sent his Son to Earth to be crucified and resurrected, one can be creative with what a relationship with God looks like.

The Bible Introduction groups handed out pieces of paper with a few questions related to the text that allow the group to think about the passage without over-intellectualizing it. For example, after reading Matthew 5:13-26 ("You are the salt of the earth...") we were asked the following: Can I believe Jesus when he tells us we are the salt of the earth? What effect do his words have on me? What people are examples for me of being salt, of being light? How can we share this with others? Once a week the groups are assigned a passage and asked to simply sit in silence together for an hour, meditating. Frequently, the group discussions became very personal, and the group members shared exactly how they relate the passage to their lives. We were asked to think, but more with the heart and less with the head. It might seem like an overly simple approach to the ever-complicated Bible, but I have often had my most profound moments of understanding of a text in the Taizé Bible Introductions. If I have learned anything in Taizé, it is that simplicity can have unlimited depths of profundity.

Midday prayer is at 12:20, followed by lunch, and in the afternoon most people have some sort of assigned job. Whether it is cleaning toilets, washing dishes, sweeping floors,

welcoming new-comers, or setting up tents, the pilgrims are depended on to allow the community to function. Many of the cleaning supplies look like they came from the 19th century (especially the brooms and mops), but they usually function. None of the jobs are very complicated. They allow one to feel useful without having any particular skills or knowledge. The work can be tedious some days, but I appreciated the opportunity to work. The functioning of the community is transparent, there are not any politics or bureaucracy involved. Taizé only asks for the bare minimum contribution from the pilgrims to keep the community running (it's one of the cheapest places one could find to stay in all of France) and they don't accept donations of any kind. Since Taizé goes off the bare minimum, the pilgrims must work and clean up after themselves.

I was so attracted to Taizé in the first place because I felt like no one there wanted my money or viewed me as a consumer. There is a spirit of abundance that pervades the whole community. There is almost nothing in Taizé (only a few buildings and a church in the middle of the countryside) but at the same time there is everything. What does one really need to live? I continually asked myself that question, endlessly mystified by the simplicity of the Taizé community. Since there is not a complicated business model involved with Taizé, the pilgrim feels like a very integral part of everything from the first day. One does not have to be special, rich, or super intelligent to be an integral part, only willing to help out with the manual things that must be done.

The afternoons are long in Taizé. Apart from the work and the occasional workshops in the late afternoon, there is not anything else planned. I did many things in the afternoon, such as play guitar, have conversations, take walks, but I felt like the whole afternoon was only a preparation for the evening prayer at 8:30. The day is structured so that everything centers

around the prayers, and I felt like anything I did would not have as much importance as simply showing up to the church at prayer-time, a time dedicated to reflecting on my relationship with God. It is not that the rest of the day became unimportant, but I started to put all of my thoughts and actions into perspective. Awareness of God's presence began to sink into my actions, and the daily anxieties of life started melting away.

The prayers provided a time for me to lift up my life to God. However, Taizé does not define God, or ask the individual to define God. God is seen as an all-encompassing presence that can be found in any area of life. The Taizé hymns are short and beautiful, with a text that reflects the spirit of the prayer. The text is sung over and over again for several minutes. Rather than becoming monotonous, the melody and the text take on a new life during the prayer. I realized that praying means staying with one idea for a long time. I was challenged to go deeper, focusing on one thing, rather than overwhelming myself with many words and ideas. The songs are written in many different languages to accommodate the many nationalities who come to visit. Perhaps my favorite is a Spanish tune: "Nada te turbe, nada te espante. Quien a Dios tiene, nada le falta. Nada te turbe, nada te espante. Solo Dios, basta." It means: "Nothing to bother you, nothing to scare you. Whoever has God lacks nothing. Nothing to bother you, nothing to scare you. Only God, it's enough." When one meditates on the meaning of those words, it becomes clear that they can apply to any aspect of one's life. If one could truly let that message sink into their marrow and live accordingly, he would lead an extremely beautiful life, indeed. The message is applicable to any human being, whatever his background or religion may be.

If there is any doctrine that is promoted in Taizé, it is that Jesus is the Son of God, was crucified, and resurrected. Jesus is worshipped abundantly in Taizé. There is a wooden cross with Jesus painted on it at the back of the church, which is brought forward to be prayed in front

of every evening. Every Friday there is the “Prayer Around the Cross” which involves the pilgrims lining up behind the wooden cross, (which rests on the ground instead of hanging up like usual) and taking turns kneeling beside it and placing their heads on the image of Jesus on the cross. There are usually hundreds of pilgrims waiting to pray, so the prayer Friday night can last until the early hours of the morning.

Friday night is special, but there is also a dark tone to the prayer. The participants remember his crucifixion by praying around the cross and lifting up their sorrows to him. The message is that Christ suffered a horrible death, so he can alleviate our suffering with his empathy. Perhaps the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, described it the best in his autobiography The Seven Storey Mountain. His brother was a fighter pilot in WWII and had very little chance of survival. Thomas Merton was on edge to hear news from his brother, and when the Abbot called him out from the fields for an important message, he was almost sure they were going to tell him his brother had passed away. He writes: “I passed the pietà at the corner of the cloister, and buried my will and my natural affections and all the rest in the wounded side of the dead Christ.”<sup>28</sup> In the midst of extreme sorrow, it was the only thing he felt he could do.

While some carry heavier burdens than others, every human being is weighed down by something. Pain is part of the experience of being human. The Friday night prayers were a reminder of that, and a meditation on the reality of pain and suffering. The prayer is not a plea to take away the pain, but the soft acknowledgement and acceptance of it.

It would be very sad indeed if someone came for the Friday prayer but did not stay for the Saturday night prayer. Saturday celebrates the resurrection. At the beginning of the prayer

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<sup>28</sup>Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Mariner Books, 1999. pg 442.



everyone is given a candle, and they are all lighted at the middle of the prayer. It is a simple but powerful homage to the resurrected Christ. Sitting in the church singing with thousands of lighted candles is a perfect symbol for the hope, happiness, and rejuvenation of the Gospels. In Taizé, the symbol suffices. There is no need for a long homily on the meaning. The Paschal mystery of Jesus' resurrection remains completely mysterious to the Christian.

For many it is difficult to accept something as truth that cannot be seen. I have always had this experience with Christianity and all other religions. I can accept the idea that there is a very abstract God (one that no one can describe at all) that unites creation, but anything past that gets tricky. Why should I believe in a guy who was sent to Earth, crucified, and resurrected? I did not see it myself, and I will never have any proof of it. Sermons based on fear that tell me I must believe in order to avoid eternal suffering are not very convincing to me.

What is more, my life is pretty awesome on its own, and I feel like I am good at managing it. I don't want others to tell me what to do or believe. Why do I need Jesus or any church at all? I think that has always been an important question posed by adolescents and young adults, especially by my generation. There is a decline in church attendance and the "spiritual but not religious" mantra is a common one.

I think it is only a place like Taizé that could have led me to accept the mystery I cannot see or prove of Christ's resurrection. Otherwise, I would have failed to see the point of it all. Prone to rebellion, I would have immediately rejected anything that smelled of authoritarianism. I began to believe in the Gospels because of the life that the brothers of Taizé lead and the life of community they provide for all the pilgrims. After experiencing Taizé life I did not need proof of Christ's existence. I accepted it because I could see the beautiful transformation of belief in Christ in an individual and in a community. In other words, I needed to see people who totally

accepted Christ, created a beautiful life around Christianity, and then invited me (but not demanded me) to join.

Most of the participants only stay a week, but I had plans to stay for six weeks. If one stays a longer time, the life in Taizé changes. People aged 17-29 can stay for longer and after spending a week in the regular accommodation, they move to another dormitory. They become “volunteers” rather than just regular participants, and have more responsibility. The volunteers usually organize groups of pilgrims to do the jobs around Taizé. The name of the shared female dormitory is called “N’Toumi.” There were about forty girls living there while I was there, from five different continents. Every year, Taizé invites numerous young people from South America, Asia, and Africa to come for three months. Many of the guests come during the summer, when I was there. I had four roommates from Indonesia, Lithuania, Puerto Rico, and Germany. The common life is interesting in Taizé, especially as one begins to get to know the others and make some friendships. I have never experienced a more diverse cultural and linguistic exchange.

The life of the volunteers focuses around three things: the common life, the prayers, and the work. I both struggled with and immensely enjoyed the common life in the Taizé dormitory. It asked a lot of me to share everything with a large group of people I barely knew. I was used to spending a lot of time alone but suddenly I had to share all my meals, prayers, work, free time, and space. I often felt the cultural barriers and was prone to judging things I did not understand about the other women. Every girl in N’Toumi had a distinct way of expressing herself and I was perpetually awed and bewildered at the same time.

There were many women from Latin America when I was there who provided a whole new dimension to the atmosphere. Many of them did not speak English (which was the agreed common language in the dormitory) and they came from a different culture. They brought their

respective cultures to the Taizé dormitory with their language, personalities, music choices, dances, and gestures. I would often come into the common room met by salsa music, or shrieks and exclamations in Spanish. All of the Taizé girls eventually learned the word “amiga” because the Latinas would energetically shout “Hola amiga!” to anyone who entered the room. There was a lot of dancing going on in the common room (the kind one doesn’t expect in a monastery). I never guessed I would travel to a remote village in rural France to hear “el merengue” and “la cumbia.”

Having studied Spanish in school, I was able to communicate with them which gave me a window into their thoughts. They often compared Taizé to back home, amazed at the differences in culture. Many of them came from poor countries such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala and had never been able to travel from their country before. My El Salvadorian friend Maritza explained to me that she had never stepped foot in a plane before. She came from a rural village where most people make a living farming and where it is normal to have families with more than seven or eight children. She had already been there two months when I arrived and explained to me the difficulties she had when she first arrived in Taizé. Her school didn’t offer foreign languages, so she was able to communicate with very few people. She also wasn’t accustomed to the form of prayer. It took her a month before she felt at home in the strange and foreign French village.

I like Latin American cultures and language, so I often sought out the company of those from South America. Once a week all the women gathered in the common room at night to discuss a given topic. One week we discussed the “Paschal Mystery” and broke up into small groups of five or six to talk. I opted to join the group of Spanish speakers, eager to hear their opinions on the elusive topic. They had a lot to say, and I quickly realized they approached it

differently than I did. For me, Christianity is an abstract idea to which I am inexplicably drawn. The mystery of Jesus' resurrection is at the center of Christianity, but it is hard to know how to approach the strange phenomena that one cannot see or prove. I noticed that my Latin friends thought differently; the phenomenon was not so abstract in their minds.

They explained the almost tangible sensations they felt during the prayer (especially during Saturday night prayer when we celebrate resurrection) and how they felt that their minds and souls were being cleared away of filth. For me, prayer was a time of gentle exploration (dipping my feet into the pond of Christianity to test the water) but for them it was an absolutely necessary time of repentance and union with God. They were already neck-deep in the water. Geiddy from the Dominican Republic explained that she was considering becoming a nun because of the importance of the Paschal Mystery in her life. She felt renewed after the prayers in Taizé, feeling that she was offering up her flaws and suffering to God, and becoming stronger through the Holy Spirit.

Her sharing of religious experience seemed so genuine to me. I wondered if I was missing something by not seeing the literal implications of the resurrection in my life and the nature around me. In a workshop during my first week in Taizé, one of the brothers had offered the short quote "practice resurrection." I had wondered what that meant, not seeing how I could apply an event from two thousand years ago to my life today. After the sharing with the Latinas I thought about it in another way. I started asking myself: "what elements of the resurrection can I see around me?" And thus, a beautiful world of renewal and rebirth started opening up to me. I began to see examples of the pattern of resurrection in all of nature, in plants, animals, and humans. Everything always tends toward the cycle of death and resurrection, and with Christianity, life and resurrection always wins even when there is death and suffering. The most

obvious example I realized was the changing of the seasons. Easter happens at a time when the Earth is renewing itself and coming out of winter's grip. The blossoms come out knowing that they will wither away in a few months time. But the next year they will come back yet again.

I knew that my Hispanic friends were all Catholic, and having come from a Protestant background I wondered if that was the cause of our difference in approach. I have not had very much experience with the Sacraments, and have often wondered what the point is of having them. We take Communion every day in Taizé, and I realized that many of the Catholics were viewing this time as a literal ingesting of the body and blood of Christ. I did not understand how to view it this way. I wondered how a papery tasteless wafer could be seen as Christ's flesh. Nevertheless, I took the Communion every day feeling that it was right to participate in the ceremony. One afternoon in Taizé, my thoughtful and intelligent friend from Singapore, Jia Xin, entered my room and asked a question out of the blue. "Do you take the Communion in the mornings?" I answered yes, to which she replied with another question: "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" We verified that we were both Protestants, and she went on to ask more questions about my church at home and my religious beliefs. Did I view the Communion literally? Did I understand what it meant to eat the wafer at church? What do the Sacraments mean to me, and how do I react to Taizé's treatment of the Communion?

These questions were deeply important to Jia Xin. She explained that she deliberately did not take Communion in Taizé, because she was confused about what it meant to her. I didn't have any good answers for her, but she made me think about what I was doing. I opted to continue to take the Communion, but with a different approach. I came to realize it is a deeply mystical moment in the service, a time of union with the spiritual dimension. If we take Communion, then we are assenting to become part of the mystical body of Christ. I took the

wafer knowing that I really did want to enter that body. I wanted to enter another realm past my sensory experience.

Taizé is ecumenical, not conforming to a particular sect of Christianity. Brother Roger grew up Protestant but was heavily influenced by the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic traditions. The prayers combine elements of many Christian traditions. Therefore, many people can come together and enjoy prayer in the same place. While the respective traditions that the participants come from are different (as with me and the Catholic hispanic women) we can share something. It is beautiful what I can learn from the differences.

It isn't only Protestants and Catholics who come together in Taizé. I met quite a few young people who didn't conform to any religion at all, many of them grappling with questions of existentialism and questioning whether God exists. Agnostics and atheists make up a considerable portion of the Taizé pilgrims. I will never forget one of the girls I met in one of my Bible introductions. Her name was Charlie, a green-haired gothic lesbian from Berlin, Germany. The topic of discussion was world peace, and how we could begin to work toward it when we returned to our respective communities. My answer was that we must find inner peace through contemplation, prayer, and meditation, and that the peace would shine through everything we do, affecting the people and situations surrounding us. Most of the people in the group agreed and offered some kind of response along the same lines. However, Charlie did not agree. In a thick German accent she proclaimed that all humans were evil, there was nothing we could do, and maybe there was no point in spending all that effort trying to be good. "But what about the inner peace...." I insisted, only to be cut off with a quick retort of "There can be no inner peace if you actually pay attention to what is going on in the world."

I thought about her response extensively. How true it is that the world contains a lot of violence, injustice, and misery! But Charlie's argument actually convinced me even more of my original opinion. If everyone in the discussion group were more or less at peace with themselves, there would be peace in the group. Charlie was not at peace with herself, and she created conflict. The day after the discussion I sat beside her during morning prayer. While we were supposed to be singing, Charlie was voraciously reading a thick book by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Her eyes looked troubled as she underlined and highlighted various passages of the text. I asked her after the prayer why she was reading Nietzsche and she responded: "Someone told me this book provided a way out of nihilism, so I'm trying." Charlie was grasping for some kind of truth, some way out of the miserable abyss that is nihilism and atheism.

I wondered why she had come to Taizé at all. Why would one come to a Christian community to read Nietzsche instead of participate, and to argue for nihilism during a discussion on the Bible and world peace? She did not share much about her personal life, but it was clear that she was suffering a great deal, tortured by something in her past. For that reason, she could not see how peace could be attained in the world.

When asked why humans suffer so much Brother Roger replied: "Ah, there is nothing more difficult than answering that question. Can a God of love inflict suffering? No, we know it isn't he who is responsible. But oh the suffering, the inexplicable suffering of humanity, of little children...!"<sup>29</sup> Although he finds the question difficult to answer in words, Brother Roger undoubtedly lived constantly seeking to find the good and the redeemable in every person. He listened to everyone who came to speak with him without judgment. Instead of giving an

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<sup>29</sup>Spink 175.

explanation or a solution to their problems, he simply existed with them. He saw suffering but was not disheartened by it. I asked one of the current brothers who knew Brother Roger for many years what he was like. “He could listen so well” the brother replied. “and he showed the rest of us how to have compassion.”

Brother Roger always stayed in the church long after the service was over, listening to people who came to share what was troubling them in their lives. He did not try to breach the topic of theodicy, to explain away their suffering, or to tell them what to do to make it better. He simply listened. Brother Roger explains practice of listening best himself:

“What can we reply to those who do not believe? Nothing. Confronted by human suffering we are often at a loss for words. It is then that the miraculous can make itself apparent. Christ is with us. He accompanies and suffers with every human being. We go to the church late at night and find them praying in half-darkness. They are there long before the common prayer begins and long after it has finished, and there are just as many to listen to in the cold of winter as in the summer months. Why do they come? In search of God, the spirit of the living God, that unique essential that is sometimes so hidden from our eyes. They come to question themselves a little and sometimes to unburden themselves.”<sup>30</sup>

I met another German girl in Taizé, Christiane, who told me she had come to Taizé to recapture the “living faith.” Her straight blonde hair usually pulled back in a ponytail, she wore simple clothes and held herself up straight with ease. She was usually carrying a book or two with her, eager to study a chapter whenever there was a quiet moment throughout the day. She had lived in Taizé for six months when she was twenty-one, found it to be a lovely and

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<sup>30</sup>Spink 149.



monumental experience for her “living faith”, and now that she was twenty-eight she returned to find it again. After spending many years in the university studying theology she felt like she had lost part of her faith. We had many long discussions on the nature of God and prayer, and what Taizé meant for us. I found her views to be similar to mine, only she was older and had more experiences to share. She is an extremely intelligent and studious person, constantly analyzing situations to try to understand the meaning. She is undoubtedly meant for academia, with her analytical skills and intellectual tendencies. She had already finished a master’s degree in theology and was about to begin a doctoral program.

Since I had completed a bachelor’s degree in religious studies, I was interested to know why she was pursuing the academic study of theology so rigorously. I often saw her with a book in the prayers, and she would stay in the church later to read and listen to the singing. Like me, she had a tendency to intellectualize matters of faith. She explained that although Taizé does not present theology in an intellectual manner, her time in Taizé is invaluable. The prayers strengthen her living faith, and light a fire under the ideas that she pursues in her studies. She wrote to me a few weeks after she left the Taizé community:

Taizé seems so far away already... and yet, lessons learned at Taizé return to me. E.g. I started reading the Bible almost every day. It really gives me something on a personal level. I'm curious and excited to learn more about God and how we can relate to him and "walk with him", as sister Jessica said in a Bible introduction in silence. Also in regard to doing theology full time from September onwards I realize a need to deepen my faith more in Scripture first

before I read other theologians' interpretations. That's something I neglected very much during my studies...<sup>31</sup>

When Christiane talks about the “Bible introduction in silence” she is referring to the week of silence that is offered for anyone in Taizé. One can always opt to spend the week apart from Taizé in the neighboring village Ameugny. There are Bible introductions given every day by one of the Sisters of Saint Andrew, the order of nuns who live in Ameugny. There is a big, quiet house in the middle of the village, about a fifteen minute walk from Taizé where all the people are housed who want to spend the week in silence. The participants walk to Taizé three times a day for prayer, but spend the rest of the day in Ameugny. It is a time of profound rest and introspection, a time of intimacy with God. I spent a week of silence near the beginning of the summer, eager to have this experience and to make my prayers more earnest.

I have noticed in my life that since prayer is such an abstract activity, it often becomes pushed to the side. It just doesn't seem so important when there isn't an obvious gain from it. Even in a meditative, contemplative place like Taizé it can be hard to see why one is engaging in all the prayer. The mind always tends to wander. During a week in silence, one confronts the meaning of prayer. Consuming social pressures aren't there to distract one from careful observation and introspection.

From the first day in silence I felt unbelievably joyful, feeling the freedom I had craved from social pressure. I found very little resistance to the silence within myself. I loved it and savored it. I felt intimate with myself, not feeling like I had to be or do anything. I would take long walks around the Burgundian countryside, looking at the buttercup and poppy-covered

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<sup>31</sup>Werner, Christiane. Email correspondence with author. July 7, 2015.

fields, thinking about how my existence could be similar to that of a flower. Near the middle of the week I entered this paragraph in my journal (inspired by Luke 12:22-32):

“The poppy filled pasture is one of the most important bits of wisdom I should ever take with me. If God clothes the wildflowers in these colors and gives them all they need, then why would I need to worry about my life? Who ever added even a cubit to their lifetime by being anxious? The poppies are not passive, rather they put down roots and spread their seeds, and soak up all the water and sunlight they need. They don’t ask for more than they need, and they aren’t idle or lazy. But they are clearly not anxious. The day comes when the poppies shrivel up, when their short lives are over, but they do not fear this day.”

In addition to long walks, I spend a lot of time in the village chapel in Ameugny. Sister Dominique would give us a Bible introduction in the morning, and encouraged us to spend time contemplating the passage later in the day. She recommended that we choose a time and a place every day to set aside for imaginative prayer. Every day after lunch I walked down to the small and empty church to re-read the passage from the morning and contemplate it. The sister had advised me to try to “feel” the passage, not to “study” it.

At that point, I had only had experience reading the Bible and trying to intellectually understand the words. What did imaginative prayer mean, and how could you go deeper than simply studying the words? I decided to work with very short passages, only focusing on a verse or two at a time. I would try my best not to “understand” the verse, but to let it totally envelop me, relying more on my feelings than on my intellect. I’ll never forget when I meditated on the passage in the last chapter of Luke. It is the story of two men who are walking to Emmaus after Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus joins them, but the men do not know who he is. He accompanies them on their journey, speaking to them about Scripture, but does not reveal who he is until the

evening when they have reached the village and Jesus breaks the bread for the meal. What a beautiful story to be at the end of the Gospel! At the end of Jesus' story is a story about how the story does not really end. I imagined myself as a traveler, meeting Jesus on the way knowing that he had been crucified just a few days before. The story seeped into my skull, creating a powerful memory of comfort and awe.

The rest of my time I spent either reading, painting, or working in the garden. I liked being with myself, happy to have the whole day to do simple tasks that I enjoyed. Perhaps my most vivid memory in silence was of an Australian woman, Gillian. We were in silence together, which meant that we lived in the same house, ate together, and saw each other throughout the day, but could not speak to one another. I had a nasty head cold during the silence week, and it was very apparent at Bible introductions and meal times because I was constantly sniffing and blowing my nose. One morning, Gillian stopped me after breakfast and passed me a note. It read: "Ingrid, I can do something that may help you with your cold. Maybe we can meet in your room after lunch today?"

After lunch she came into my room with a tub of warm water. She set it on the ground and propped me up with some pillows. Using a bit of lavender oil, she massaged my feet and then placed them in the water, breaking the silence briefly to tell me I should stay in that position and that she would be back in twenty minutes. I was immediately reminded of the foot-washing in the book of John, how Jesus washes his disciples feet and shows his humility. When Gillian came back she rubbed my feet a little more, dried them, and then put my socks back on. She explained that it was a simple, anthroposophical technique she had learned to do when someone was sick. It is helpful for bringing down fevers and restoring homeostasis. She told me to take a nap after the foot bath, and it would be very restorative. The foot bath ended up doing a lot of

good for me. I did take a nap and rested deeply, and woke up feeling energized. I was not totally cured, but that was not the point of the whole thing anyway. I was so moved by her humble act of intimacy, and was grateful for it.

There was also another woman who moved me during the week of silence. During one of the Bible introductions the sister asked us to go around and say a word or a phrase to sum up our experience thus far. Suddenly confronted with the opportunity to vocalize my feelings, I could not think of a good enough phrase. I simply said “This week I have been learning how to pray.” When it was Rosa’s turn, a Portuguese woman, she said: “I am not sure why, but after this week, like an unlatched door my heart is completely open to forgive.” I remembered what she said, and at the end of the week when we could speak to each other again I asked her what she meant. She told me she had had a relationship of nine years with the same man and over the past few months he had left her for another woman. Before coming to Taizé she had been in a deep depression, trying to figure out what happened and blind with anger that he left.

Her sister had convinced her to go to Taizé to experience the solitude. She hadn’t been too keen on going, but she did it just to humour her sister. She explained how the week in silence was the best thing she could have possibly done. It was the best week of her life, a total renewal of mind and spirit and a powerful invitation to forgive. She felt the forgiveness sweep through her and she recognized it as the first step towards moving forward. After her silence she felt strong enough to make that step. Indeed, forgiveness is an important aspect of life which is often stressed in the Bible and the Taizé prayers.

This summer my mind was opened to the ways of others, and the people I met were what gave zest to the experience. I had to work on seeking to understand rather than be understood. My heart became open to be moved by the actions and words of those around me. Perhaps my

closest friend in Taizé was my Lithuanian roommate, Dovile. All the members of room became close friends over the weeks we lived together and I was the first of the group to leave Taizé. All of us were only there for a short time, three months or less. A few days after I left Dovile wrote me:

...When you left somehow the sunshine left our room also, and everybody got so somber. Suddenly we got the reality taste of separation, that even though we are like family now in Taizé beyond these walls our family is non-existent, that is, what we had here is only very very temporary maybe? Yes life outside of Taizé is hard, because you know why? Humans are supposed to live in community! You see how it is easy if you share the work, and don't have to DO it all by yourself! So much less pressure, and you can get sick and don't go to work when it's necessary, and you will still get fed, have a roof over your head and survive! Our society is build all wrong now, that's why the rich people who have it all, are still unhappy and depressed, and don't understand why it is so...because we have lost our companionship with other people...Individuality is over-rated. And I'm thinking of living one day in a community. I'm beginning to understand what I've come here to learn.<sup>32</sup>

I realized I had tasted what real community and friendship felt like in Taizé for a few weeks.

Dovile hit the nail on the head when she wrote about how community gives meaning to a

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<sup>32</sup>Kelpsaite, Dovile. Email correspondence with author. June 23, 2015.

human's life. There just isn't much to live for outside of the friendship and love one finds in a community. I wondered what made it possible for us to come from such diverse places to commune in a remote French village.

All that was necessary for reconciliation between us was to share was the belief in God and the desire to deepen our spiritualities. We all came from such diverse religious backgrounds, and Taizé provided a sort of common denominator that could speak to us all. Simplicity is key in Taizé, and not only are the prayers accessible, they are endlessly profound. I often wondered what was going through the minds of others during the long chants into the night, or the stretches of silence during each prayer. But I didn't have to know, I just had to pray in my own way and let the others do it in theirs. Taizé allowed that freedom for everyone to pray in their own way.

After seven weeks in the community, it was time to pack up and go. In Taizé there is a tradition the volunteers started to "hold a Namaste" for the volunteers who leave. It is a time where everyone gathers into a room, sings songs, and tells stories about the person who is leaving. It's a way to officially say goodbye to the friends one has made in Taizé. I had been to a couple of the Namastes for other volunteers, and had decided I did not want one for myself. I do not like being the center of attention, and preferred to have my friends tell me goodbye in private.

A couple of nights before I was planning to leave, a few of my closest friends and I planned to go on an outing to a nearby town called "Cluny" to eat dinner and walk around a bit. In the group was Lea from Germany, Irene from Indonesia, Chinh from Vietnam, Dovile from Lithuania, and Tairis from Puerto Rico. Cluny is a beautiful little town, it has preserved many of the architecture from centuries past and is a simple place with some restaurants, grocery and clothing stores, and an ancient monastery. We shuffled around, ate dinner, and walked over to a

river-bed to sit in the grass. It could not have been more apparent that we came from different backgrounds, we all spoke different languages (but could communicate in English at some level), had varying opinions on religion, and expressed ourselves in different ways. The differences did not matter in the slightest this evening. It only made it more beautiful. Although we had different ways of expressing humor, we were able to laugh together.

Someone suggested that we have an informal Namaste for me beside this river-bed under the cool evening sky. I did not object, as I was enjoying the light and intimate nature of our outing. We sipped on a bottle of wine and sat cross-legged in the grass, enjoying a light breeze. Everyone went around in a circle, describing their first impressions of me, memories they had shared, and expressing how much they had enjoyed our friendship. I realized that although I had felt like I was a small part of the whole Taizé equation, my presence had meant a lot to a group of individuals. Instead of blushing, I accepted the compliments and eagerly returned them, wanting my friends to see how much I appreciated my whole experience. I will always remember this evening as one of the most lovely in my life. Rarely is conversation profound and light at the same time, intimate but not overwhelming.

I was still unsure about how I was leaving Taizé (it is difficult to book train or bus tickets in the middle of nowhere with limited wifi), but I had planned to leave at the end of seven weeks on a Sunday. The week technically ends on Sunday, and the weekly tasks change. Sundays are typically the day when volunteers leave and enter the N'Toumi dormitory. My plan was to go to Rennes, a northern city in France, to spend some time with a friend. During my last week I looked at possibilities for transportation when I could, finding difficulties with booking a ticket and becoming slightly more worried each day. I had started simply approaching people in the community, asking them when they were leaving and what direction they were going. I lightly



eavesdropped on people, and if I heard they were speaking French I asked if they were leaving this Sunday and if they were going north.

Saturday I approached an older man to ask about a ride, and although he could not help me, a young French man, Nicolas, had overheard our conversation and came over to offer me a ride. He was going up to Paris that very evening, where I would surely be able to catch a train to Rennes. “You can come with me. But I’m leaving in just a few hours!” I thought it over, and then told him I’d meet him in that very spot that evening. It seemed so surreal that I was suddenly leaving this community, and so abruptly. I ran over to the dormitory to explain I was leaving that evening because I knew it would take awhile to say goodbye to everyone. I had letters to write, my bag to pack, and a lot of people to see before I left.

As I hastened around the grounds the last few hours, I felt such a mixture of emotion. I was overwhelmed by memories from the last few weeks. I couldn’t go to a single place on the Taizé grounds that did not call up a memory. Some of them melancholic, some pensive, many jubilant and euphoric. I knew I had to move on, and I felt like it was time, but I knew it would be hard. That evening, I wolfed down my dinner in order to meet my ride in time. My last memory in Taizé was tarrying around Nicolas’ car with a few of the N’Toumi women, saying some last minute goodbyes, unable to process that I was actually leaving. The time came for me to get in the car that bright Saturday evening, and Nicolas and I drove off on the small country road, heading out of Burgundy. I knew there were many more adventures ahead, but I would see them all through a different lens after taking part in Gospel-inspired simplicity of the Taizé community.

### **Chapter 3: Applying the Taizé Experience**

During a private meeting with a Taizé brother, I expressed my desire to create an intentional community, bound by the Holy Spirit, that could live in simplicity. I explained that I loved Taizé, but I felt called to go back home to the Appalachian Mountains and live in community there. He replied that many Taizé pilgrims express the same thing, and that it gladdens the brothers to know that their community is inspiring. He told me that although the world is complicated and constantly becoming more complicated, there is a lot of hope left for a community. It may seem difficult to start, but really it only requires simplicity of heart.

One thing he said that stuck with me was that I should not go home and “create another Taizé.” The community in the Bourgogne countryside is one of a kind and has formed based on the needs and circumstances of a particular landscape and group of people. The story would look much different if it began in a small mountain town in western North Carolina.

Now that I have returned to the United States, I am about to start living in a small community just outside of Boone, North Carolina, in a town called Todd. It started with Blackburn’s Chapel, a Methodist Church, which received a grant from Duke University to begin a project called the “Blackburn House.” There is a parsonage next to the church that had been unused for quite some time. The proposal was to: “convert the unused parsonage into The Blackburn House, with the goal of creating an intentional Christian community of four residents. They will live and worship in Todd, covenant together for a life of discipleship, explore and implement effective leadership methods in the rural setting, cultivate their ministry calling, be Christ to one another and the local community.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>“Our Story.” The Blackburn House. <http://theblackburnhouse.com/about-us/our-story/>.

I began going to this church my freshman year of college, because I had heard they were looking for a pianist. I needed a way to make a little income that year, and was intrigued by the little Chapel tucked away in the mountains. When I first started going, there were very few members and the Blackburn House project had not even started yet. Church attendance usually averaged from somewhere between ten and fifteen people. Over the past four years, I have had the privilege of seeing the community expand in beautiful ways. The Blackburn House project has brought a new life and vitality to the congregation. With a team of four people who are dedicated and passionate about the community, church attendance has risen and the congregation has become more intimate. The church now does more service projects, such as tutoring at Green Valley School, providing meals for destitute families in the High Country, and coordinating the Farm Café<sup>34</sup> when it comes to Todd. More programs are beginning to be put in place for the congregation such as a nursery for young children, a youth group, and more support for the elderly. There is now a beautiful garden in front of the parsonage that yields fresh produce, and a local artist designed intricate stained glass windows of mountain flowers for the church.

Despite the expansion and further development of the community, Blackburn retains its simplicity. The Rule of Blackburn is not so far off from the The Rule of Taizé written by Brother Roger in the early 1950s. The Blackburn residents are expected to live a common life, sharing meals, work, and prayer. One is expected to practice radical hospitality, constantly seeking to serve and understand others.

The residents also pledge to resist consumerism. The Rule States:

- We will share part of our meal budget in common.

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<sup>34</sup>F.A.R.M. Cafe is a non-profit, pay-what-you-can community kitchen that builds a healthy and inclusive community. We provide high quality and delicious meals produced from local sources when available, served in a restaurant where everybody eats, regardless of means. <http://farmcafe.org/>

- We will spend as much of our meal budget on local farmers, as is possible.
- We will eat simply when we are together, and more extravagantly as an act of hospitality when we have guests.
- We commit to sharing resources when possible and an attitude of generosity.
- We commit to living simply and slowing down.<sup>35</sup>

I see many instances of similarity in the goal of Taizé and the goal of the Blackburn House. The brothers of Taizé committed to living simply and sharing everything they have with their fellow brothers. There could not be a better example of a place that resists consumerism. If anything will bind a community together, I know that it has to be simplicity of mind and spirit. I learned that in Taizé and want to translate that to my experience in Todd. The question should always be “How little can I get by with?” and not “How much more can I get?” It is not lack of money that brings poverty, but vanity.

While the Blackburn House is not monastic, and the residents do not pledge for life, it is a similar way of life that is put forth. Our community hopes to accomplish something similar to the ecumenism proposed in Taizé. We hope to come from different racial, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds to share a common life with each other. Simplicity is what one must seek in order to live in harmony. We will share everything we have, listening to each other, trying to understand one another, and resisting consumerism. We will follow the spirit of the Gospel, seeing an over-arching vision of love that is bigger than ourselves which will bind us together.

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<sup>35</sup>“Our Rule.” The Blackburn House. <http://theblackburnhouse.com/about-us/our-rule/>.

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